Nothing in nature is silent, they taught me, naturally silent, that is. Everything has its own sound, speech or language, even if it is only the language of silence…and if you were willing to learn the sound of what appeared to be silence, you understood then that the word was but another sound—of silence.¹

It is the coarsest of currencies, you know—the word—crass and clumsy as a way of communication; a second cousin, and a poor one at that, of Silence.²

In linguistics, silence is often perceived as opposed to speech. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary describes silence in terms of “the absence of sound”, “the condition of being quite”, and “the state of not speaking” that is marked by the lack of speech.³ Silence is perceived as a lack when compared to speech and language. It is perceived in terms of that which is absent rather than that which is also present. In several linguistic models, silence is either considered an anti-thesis of rhetoric, or something that is enforced upon people and is related to oppression. The descriptions of silence as absence predominate in the Western tradition because of the valorisation of the ‘logos’, the ‘word’, as something that can be equated with freedom and liberation. As opposed to speech, silence has often been considered as the discourse of the powerless. The issues of power and agency also crop up in an analysis of silence as opposed to language. Laura Beth Carroll, in her doctoral dissertation, “The Rhetoric of Silence: Understanding

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² Ibid. 72.
Absence as Presence makes an interesting analysis by arguing that silence be considered as rhetoric, as something that is present, rather than absent, and develops a taxonomy of rhetorical silence. She analyses two types of silence, namely, collaborative silences and resistant silences.

In this paper, I will analyse how silence is not opposed to language, but is something that is rather complementary to language: it adds meaning to language. As in the other chapters, I shall not treat silence here as rhetoric in terms of binaries, like something that is opposed to speech and is characterised by absence; rather my contention in this chapter would be like that of the writer Phulboni in The Calcutta Chromosome — that silence is characterised by presence and has a life of its own. Silence here is a creative force. It is not opposed to speech, but renders wholeness to speech. Silence can be a collaborative act as well as an act of resistance. In both the cases, it can be a matter of choice when we take into consideration the subaltern or marginal characters. Since they are often denied the privilege of representation in mainstream narratives, subaltern groups frequently use silence as rhetoric. Silence would often be a better tool than language, because language is the discourse of the powerful. Silence would not only resist the equation of power, but would also disrupt the very tools that have created the discrimination. Laura Carroll rightly suggests:

When marginalised groups use silence as resistance, it can work to undermine the social structures that enforce their marginalization because silence disrupts the continuity of the oppression and oppressive language.

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6 Carroll, 93.
Such silences are positive because they become important tools both of communication and of protest. The subaltern group also feels that the language of the master is not the perfect tool with which he can represent his experiences. It may also be that the language of power has become the language of the corrupt, so that silence becomes an ontological priority. The subaltern silence then becomes the individual’s agency against the institutions of power. It would also be relevant in this regard to state Harold Pinter’s notion of silences— as a thematic strategy as well a linguistic strategy. Silence becomes a linguistic function in Pinter’s plays. Silence in his plays becomes an important aspect of communication as well:

We communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and … what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rear-guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves.\(^8\)

Some of the characters in Ghosh’s novels also maintain their own uniqueness by often resorting to silence. It provides them that inviolate space which can be invaded neither by social norms nor even the writer. The laconism that we find in some of Pinter’s characters assures the privacy of their thoughts and also helps them to escape the judgement of the others. This is also true in case of some of the characters in Ghosh’s novels.

In this chapter, I would deal with some of the protagonists in Ghosh’s novels who are somewhat characterised by silence. They are characterised by silence in that they are not eloquent or, probably that they are not particularly skilful in terms of verbal communication. Their silences, however, are creative, because they are ascribed a context

\(^7\) An interesting analysis of the silences in Pinter’s plays is to be found in Leslie Kane’s *The Language of Silence*.


\(^8\) Harold Pinter, “Between the Lines,” Speech to the Seventh National Student Drama Festival, Bristol, *Sunday Times*, London (March 1962).
and they are defined by that context. This context is provided by their profession or by their attachment to a particular craft—in such a manner that this attachment becomes an obsession. They speak through their obsession—not in terms of speech, but in terms of their work. It is this attachment that defines their language and characterises their silence. I will be using a rather broad definition of the subaltern, so that subalternity here would mean marginality in regard to opposing the power of the state. These characters do not speak much in terms of language; rather they prefer different modes of expression. Their use of silence is not always negative; rather they use it creatively in terms of another mode of expression, such as photography, weaving, fishing, poetry etc. Their use of silence is also suggestive of alternative epistemologies and alternative modes of understanding. Their silence thus becomes a tool of resistance against the dominant structures of the society. Their silence protects as well as characterises their difference.

**Alu and Weaving: Silence as Language**

Alu, in *The Circle of Reason*[^9], is often characterised by silence. *The Circle of Reason* begins with a description of Alu’s head, which is extraordinarily large and which earns him the nickname ‘Alu’, which in Bengali means ‘potato’. Alu had been orphaned in his childhood, as both of his parents died in a car accident. He had then come to stay with Balaram, his cousin, in the village of Lalpukur. The dimension of Alu’s head immediately fascinates Balaram to take out his phrenological claws and measure Alu’s skull. It is Alu’s extraordinarily large head that would decide the continuous flux and rootlessness that Alu would face in his life. Alu is immediately associated with four primary symbols—weaving, sewing, phrenology and Pasteur, upon which his whole life

would be structured. Balaram had tried to associate several reasons for Alu’s silence and also for his indifference to several things. Balaram is, in a sense, “strangely touched by the boy’s wide-eyed silence”.\textsuperscript{10} Here, the narrator’s metaphor “wide-eyed silence” seems to me to be extremely significant. Here, silence is given a visual dimension. It is not something that stands only as opposed to language, but is something visual which does not speak in terms of sound and yet can communicate so much. The gestures, for example, that we use during conversation also generate meaning. The visual dimension of silence is carried forward to \textit{The Glass Palace}\textsuperscript{11} with the association of photography in the novel.

Balaram thinks that Alu’s silent nature is probably because of his excessive preoccupation with his tragic past; so, he tries to explain to Alu the possibilities that the future holds for him, and that is precisely the moment when Balaram reached for his copy of Vallery-Radot’s \textit{Life of Pasteur}\textsuperscript{12}. This is a book which is going to dominate much of Alu’s life. Balaram tells him the story of how Pasteur inoculated poor ten-year-old Joseph Meister who was bitten by a rabid dog. Later on, the references to Pasteur by Balaram actually do not reflect any scientific engagement with microbiology, but rather a reformist engagement where science can improve society through universal reason. It is this zeal that is reflected in Balaram’s admiration for Pasteur when he refers to the way in which Pasteur had saved the brewers of France and the silk farmers.\textsuperscript{13} It is not Pasteur’s discovery, but the emotional aspect of a boy being saved that attracts Alu more to this book. He develops a life-long emotional attachment to this book, and ironically, it is from

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. 28.
\textsuperscript{12} René Vallery-Radot, \textit{The Life of Pasteur}, Trans. R. L. Devonshire (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928).
\textsuperscript{13} Ghosh, \textit{Circle of Reason}, 49.
this book that he must escape in order that his life does not become dominated by this book.

The theme of weaving is introduced through Maya Debnath’s family. Shombhu Debnath belonged to a weaver’s family in Noakhali. At the age of twelve, he disappeared from his house to become an apprentice to a family that belonged to the famous Boshaks of Tangail. The Boshaks of Tangail had a legendary fame in weaving which, as the narrator claims, “had ruled continents”\textsuperscript{14}:

Everyone knew the legend of the Boshaks: for centuries they had ruled continents with their gossamer weaves. But it was not only for their weaving that they were legendary; it was also for the secretiveness with which they hoarded the trade and craft secrets of their caste.\textsuperscript{15}

By bringing in the story of the Boshaks and hinting at their secretiveness, Ghosh subtly introduces the possibility of different epistemological systems and their prerogatives—the possibility that silence and secretiveness was often an epistemological priority, a choice made to preserve a tradition or skill, as opposed to the documentative nature of European Knowledge systems, which seem to demand that that which is known or can be known must be written down. This theme is also developed to a great extent in \textit{The Calcutta Chromosome}. Secretiveness, which is another dimension of silence, was often exercised as a matter of choice by traditional communities for several purposes. As opposed to the documentative nature of European knowledge systems, traditional knowledge has often been secretive and has often guarded its frontiers for reasons more than one. This silence was regularly used to protect their art from general appropriation or public scrutiny, because they felt that opening up such art forms for the general public

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 67.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 67.
would greatly reduce its quality. Such art forms demanded a lifetime of dedication to master, so as to stop it from being coarsened by external influence. It was often a religious priority for such communities, for their art form was often thought of as a way to transcend their ordinary selves. It was not because they could not have expressed themselves in terms of language, but rather because opening up their art forms to the external world would be to reduce its value. To such communities, such an art did not merely provide them with means of earning their livelihood or exercising their creative abilities; but it was to them a whole way of life and religion. Any form of mechanisation would have reduced it to the mediocrity and ordinariness of life. The automatic and similar reproducibility of the machine has reduced this traditional crafts to anonymity; and thus traditional art and craft have suffered all over the world. The learning of such arts is an endeavour of a lifetime.

Shombhu Debnath’s secret— that he was a Debnath from Noakhali and not an orphan— ultimately got revealed to the master weaver, and his tears were like a curse, as Shombhu was not able to teach his art to his community. “A crow falls out of the sky if it tries to learn peacockery”\(^\text{16}\), and his fate held on until he was able to impart his knowledge to Alu. The reference to weaving here reminds the readers of another traditional art called quilting, which is brilliantly depicted in a poem by Jasim Uddin, *Nakshi Kanthar Math (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt)*\(^\text{17}\) published in 1929. It depicts the life of the women in rural Bengal whose life, passion and dreams are celebrated through their needlework. The art itself becomes a way of expression, a language by itself. Language cannot be restricted to the oral medium or, to be specific, it

\(^{16}\) Ibid. 68.

cannot be confined to what we can speak of or what we can write about. It can also be perceived in terms of the visual—outside the periphery of the mechanics of language, that is, the word. Some of the characters in Ghosh’s novel are otherwise reticent to speak, or is silent in terms of words; but they do speak through their own art or skills. Alu’s language is thus expressed in terms of weaving and sewing, Dinu’s in terms of photography (The Glass Palace) and Fokir’s in terms of the sea and fishing (The Hungry Tide). Each art form acquires its own form of expression and encompasses a whole lifestyle, a way of living. In the writings of Amitav Ghosh, we find that there are several characters who use other modes of communication that has the power of embodying an alternative metaphysics—something that is difficult to grasp in terms of the conventional knowledge forms. This precisely is my primary emphasis in this chapter: that this silence is about a different type of language not really expressed in terms of words, written or spoken.

Ghosh’s thematic purpose of drawing references to places like Tangail and Noakhali also has historical resonances. It is also significant to note here that the Peasant Revolt (1858) and the Sannyasi Revolt (1858) originated in the Tangail district. Significantly, the Kader Bahini of Abdul Kader Siddiqui from Tangail fought the Pakistan army for the liberation of Bangladesh. A lot of weavers had to migrate to West Bengal during the Partition as well as during the Bangladeshi liberation war. Twelve to fourteen families of weavers from Noakhali and Tangail in Bangladesh migrated to the villages of Hatsimla, Dhatrigram and Nasratpur in West Bengal in 1942. The weavers,

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mainly the ‘Basak’ community, migrated from Tangail to the many villages around the area of Katwa, like Dhatrigram, Tamaghat, Samudragarh of the Burdwan district, and they are trying to revive their traditional art even to this day.

The word ‘jamdani’ was derived from the Persian words— ‘jam’, meaning cup, and ‘dani’, denoting the ‘container’. Jamdani as an art form flourished in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries under the patronage of the kings and the emperors. It became a royal monopoly during the reigns of the Mughal rulers, especially Jahangir and Aurangzeb. In the Jamdani type of weaving, the delicate motifs need to be woven by a deft hand and it demands infinite patience. The excellence in weaving depends on the skill of the weaver— in the way he is able to adapt to his social, religious and natural environment and translate them to unique art forms. Traditional jamdani motifs were primarily based on geometrical concepts adopted from local birds, flowers, leaves etc. The weavers created their own directory of designs through their artistic creativity which acquired a language and nomenclature of its own, like hazar buti, chand buti, tara buti etc. We find a detailed reference to the language that weaving creates in The Circle of Reason. The metaphor of weaving is being compared to language. Language not only constructs man, but also the machine. “The machine, like man, is captive to language.”

Alu initially finds it difficult to learn the language of the loom:

He opens his mouth, he would speak, but lo! the loom has knotted his tongue. So many names, so many words, words beaten together in the churning which created the world: Tangail words, stewed with Noakhali words, salted with Naboganj words, boiled up with English (picked up who knows where in his years of wandering). Words, words, this village teems with words, yet too few to speak of the world and the machine.

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20 Ghosh, Circle of Reason, 73.
21 Ibid. 73.
The language of machine strangely understands no barrier. It assimilates all the different
types of language in its own idiom. Alu has to learn all the three languages of the loom,
otherwise his tongue would be knotted and it would deter him from his creativity. The
mix of language that Alu has to learn in order to be trained in weaving is also strange—
two dialects from villages in Bangladesh as well as English. Neither art nor the machine
is constrained by the barriers of one language. Ghosh carries the analogy of language
further by comparing the language of the weaver to that of the poet:

A loom is a dictionary-glossary-thesaurus. Why? Words
serve no purpose; nothing mechanical. No, it is because the
weaver, in making cloth, makes words, too and trespassing
on the territory of the poets give name to things the eye
can’t see. That is why the loom has given language more
words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world’s
armies of pen-wielders.\(^\text{22}\)

They script their own fascinating journey. Although it is Balaram’s phrenology and the
hostility that Alu faces in the school which allows him to learn weaving, but Alu, under
the tutelage of Shombhu Debnath, is soon able to master the craft. To a good weaver, the
loom should encompass the world around him. Alu soon learns to make the different
butis— paddo buti, ghar buti, lokkhohira buti etc. Alu, however, finds it difficult to
encompass the world through these patterns. He makes butis from what he finds in the
outside world— bomb buti, refugee buti, war buti and political buti. He finds the struggle
between the loom and the world, the art and the reality, difficult to negotiate. “Too much
chaos; the loom demands order”.\(^\text{23}\) Shombhu Debnath is angry at the patterns that Alu
creates. There is a sort of hopelessness that emerges, as Shombhu feels that the world of
art and beauty are dead and consequently jamdani is dead too:

\(^{22}\) Ibid. 74.
\(^{23}\) Ibid. 80.
You can never learn jamdani because jamdani is dead, with the world which made it. Beauty doesn’t exist; it is made like words or forts, by speakers and listeners, warriors and defenders, weavers and wearers. That world was washed away. Jamdani is only a toy for the wives of contractors and mahajans now. Stop now: no one can make a thing beautiful alone. No one would understand him. Only a madman would try.24

Shombhu is worried that the filth of the world is affecting the quality of jamadani. He feels that its value cannot be properly appreciated. Shombhu is no exception and what he tries to express is the eternal struggle between art and reality. Alu seeks his artistic consolation in love. He saves his jamdani with his expressions of love. It is through the language of the loom— his ‘maya buti’— that Alu can defy his silence and express his love.

Alu is also an embodiment of the refugee. Once uprooted from his village owing to the death of his parents, he would have to perennially seek a home. Balaram’s continuous conflict with Bhudeb Roy leads to unforeseen circumstances, where in a confrontation with the police, Balaram dies. Alu escapes with the help of Bolai Da and begins his journey— with Jyoti Das in pursuit of him— from Calcutta to Mahe to al-Ghazira to El Oued. The condition of the illegal migrant and his terrible plight is embodied in Alu’s stay in al-Ghazira and his ultimate escape from that city. In al-Ghazira Alu settles down in the house of the former prostitute, Zindi al-Tiffaha, located in a place called The Severed Head on the Ras near the water. Zindi’s house shelters all types of refugees, some even with questionable backgrounds. Zindi’s house represents the varied multi-cultural life that such immigrants bring together. The central incident in this Section is the falling of the Star, a huge building representative of the modern capital,

24 Ibid. 81.
which collapses before it is fully constructed. Alu is trapped within a narrow furrow beneath the heaps of concrete with two swinger machines propping up a complete slab. It is the sewing machine that saves Alu from imminent death. Even the people of the Ras took him to be dead. Before he is saved, he almost miraculously survives, trapped within the concrete with no water or food. In his struggle for life and in his complete isolation, Alu undergoes a transformation. It is this silence—while being trapped between life and death—that gives him the opportunity to think, and think clearly about the problems of society.

The once silent Alu, whose life was dictated by bad circumstances, now sees a utopian dream of a society without money. This sudden transformation in him from silence to volubility is also a journey in silence. Pinter identifies two distinct forms of silences:

There are two silences. One is when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that we don’t hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished, or mocking smoke-screen which keeps the other in its place.25

For Pinter, then, there is a silence that is close to nakedness and reveals the basic instincts of man without any pretension, and there is this torrent of language which is another kind of silence that actually conceals our uncertainty. Alu’s volubility, however, is not the silence of uncertainty; but rather it is that of clarity of thought, the clarity that he had achieved through silence. Alu’s silence is suddenly transformed into clarity of thought and vision, so that when he utters, he expresses through a torrent of words almost

25 Pinter.
mesmerizing the others into listening to what he says. He achieves this clarity at the periphery of life and death. The other characters in the Ras notice this transformation:

For Alu was a very silent man. I’ve seen him in the house every day for six months now, so in a way I know him well, for you can know a lot about a man by watching him daily. Whenever he was in the house he was quiet; most of the time he was in pain, too, for he always had boils bursting out all over him.\(^{26}\)

Alu, sitting on the loom and uttering his thoughts, is given almost a metaphysical dimension. It also reminds us of Gandhi sitting with the charka:

He was talking softly, but there was a force in his voice which carried it over the clicking of the shuttle, so that nobody missed a word; an extraordinary force, perhaps you could call it passion.\(^{27}\)

Alu’s utopian ideas of a clean and pure society are not based on money and thus also hint at the possibility of an alternative epistemology—a creation of an alternative to modern society. It is also unique in the sense that these attempts are being made by the subaltern. His utopian dream is democratic in the sense that he does not impose his ideas on them; rather, he believes, they must work their way out:

They understood him, for his voice was only the question; the answers were their own.\(^{28}\)

The subaltern agency thus allows more freedom. It does not seek to appropriate all other types of discourses. Alu just starts them off and the system runs on its own, gathering its own momentum and pace, as others add their contribution to it with their own ideas. He just goes on with his ideas in a mix of languages; but in spite of that, the people in the Ras do not find it difficult to follow him. Communication is not solely dependent on the

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\(^{26}\) Ghosh, *Circle of Reason*, 278.

\(^{27}\) Ibid. 279.

\(^{28}\) Ibid. 279.
verbal or written aspect of language, and this idea is present throughout Ghosh’s fictional works. In *The Hungry Tide*, for example, in spite of the vast differences between Piya and Fokir, they do not have problems in communicating and carrying on with their job. The will and the desire to communicate assume central importance, so that silence itself often becomes a language. The problem in this case was that Alu’s utopian vision is too grand to be successful:

> He wanted to encompass the whole world. ‘Purity, Purity was what he wanted, purity and cleanliness—not just in his home, or in a laboratory or a university, but in the whole world of living men.’

The answer he sought was in the ruins of capital and the conclusion that he derived was that the source of all problem is money. He, therefore, decides to drive money out of the Ras.

Any new idea that can challenge the idea of nationhood or the flow of capital is always considered a threat to the power of the state. People in power always try to maintain their status quo, because it is in this maintenance of status quo that they feel secured. One of the incidents that Alu’s system initiated in its fight with money was the confrontation with the labour contractors, who were known as the Mugaddams. Adil al-Azraq and his cousin had come to the Ras in a car and had expected that a lot of people would turn out, as they usually did. The people in the Ras with Abu Fahl as their spokesman had decided to do away with the transaction of money, which these contractors were so fond of, and these people wanted to set their own terms of employment. Enraged, the Mugaddams tried to play a little trick on the people of Ras by asking Abu Fahl to talk to them separately. They intended to drive their car straight over

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29 Ibid. 280.
him and kill him, but failed to do so and were caught. They were brought to Zindi’s house to be judged by Hajj Fahmy, who decided that they need a purifying bath. Adil and his cousin were shocked to hear the punishment and tried to evoke a response from the crowd around them. They were “[t]rapped in that storm of silence”.\footnote{Ibid. 316.} The Mugaddams then understood the nature and depth of their humiliation. Even Jyoti Das could not understand what was happening and fled from the place. The whole incident has been described in terms of the metaphors of silence— with phrases like, “that bowl of silence”\footnote{Ibid. 316.}, “that storm of silence” and “weighed down by the silence”\footnote{Ibid. 316.}. The incident depicts the tremendous power of silence as a response or as a reaction. It is shocking because it defies the conventional codes of normalcy and is thus more effective. It also is indicative of the fact that a system does not confine itself to the whims of the creator, but it creates its own mechanics and evolves accordingly. Alu realises that his system is now out of his control.

Ghosh ironically points out how pathetic the response of the state and its system of policing are— so pitiably pathetic that it cannot even tolerate newness or alterity, which can, in any way, question the authority of the system and the mechanism on which state power is situated. Two instances, almost comical in their nature, suggest the strange mechanism of the state which affects so many lives. The first instance is the manner in which the police are duped by Bhudeb Roy into believing Balaram and consequently Alu are terrorists, thus bringing an end to the life of Balaram and his family and associates, and displacing Alu forever. Secondly, we have the incident in the Ras where the police indiscriminately attack the peaceful march of the people in the Ras who were actually
going for shopping. Many are thought to be killed in the fire, some are thought to be forcefully evicted, and those who survived had to migrate again.

The Section, is “Tamas”, begins with death— with the story of Fikry, the “dark towering nakhoda of Zeynab”\(^{33}\), whose treasured possession is a Japanese umbrella. Alu is likened to Fikry in that “they are drawn to each other by their silences” and go on spending their days “sitting together on a little ledge near the stern, silently meditating”\(^{34}\). Here again, Alu’s silences are associated not only with meditation, but also to a mode of communication— a deep communication which doesn’t require the involvement of word and this is what draws both the persons together. It is this Japanese miracle that ultimately leads to Fikry’s death: as he tries to recover it, he goes overboard with the sharks preying on him. Alu could not do anything to save him, as he is unable to throw the rope because of his thumbs. Alu is always suffering from some physical problem or the other— from his huge head, from his boils, from his thumbs, and they characterise both his helplessness and his silent nature. This Section thus begins in the midst of ominous portents with death looming large over their heads. Too many themes are being explored in this Section in rapid succession with the debate primarily hovering on science and religion between Uma Verma and Dr. Mishra.

Alu and his company find out that Jyoti Das is also staying as a house-guest with the Mishra’s. Uma Verma needs all of them because she has almost taken up a challenge with Dr. Mishra to stage Rabindranath’s *Chitrangada* in order to give the local people a taste of Indian culture. *The Life of Pasteur* still dominates the life of both Alu and Uma Verma. Alu recognises the book in Uma Verma’s book-shelf. The book was given to her

\(^{33}\) Ibid. 371.
\(^{34}\) Ibid. 372.
father by Balaram and this is the book which has dictated her life and made her what she is—a microbiologist:

But in the end, even though it meant shutting himself away, the books won. They ruled over him: for him that bookcase had all the order the world lacked. I used to think it was love, but I know better now. He was afraid of the power of science and those books of his; afraid that if he disowned them they would destroy him.35

Uma wants to get rid of the book. The book acquires a symbolic value both from the narrative point of view as well as from the thematic point of view. From the narrative point of view, the book unites the three Sections of the novel, and from the symbolic point of view, the book in the Third Section echoes the atmosphere of death as well as sparks off the science vis-à-vis religion duel. Kulfi’s death creates problems in regard to arranging a proper funeral in such a distant place, where the things required for funeral rites are not available. There is almost a fierce debate between Dr. Mishra and Uma Verma, and ultimately Uma Verma succeeds in giving Kulfi a funeral with whatever she can manage to have as supplement to the things required: “The World has come full circle … Carbolic acid has become holy water.”36 The science versus religion issue and the other themes are all brought to their right conclusion by Uma Verma when she says, “That’s the difference between us: you worry about rules and I worry about being human.”37 In fact, that is what all Ghosh’s novels strive to depict: that we should not lose ourselves in theories and machines, but rather should strive to become humane.

In this novel, also, he demonstrates how not to live by the book, but to live with the book. Many characters in this novel are so obsessed with theories that these theories

35 Ibid. 395.
36 Ibid. 411.
37 Ibid. 409.
dominate their lives beyond everything. Balaram is obsessed with Phrenology and Pasteur, Bhudeb with straight lines, Professor Samuel is obsessed with the theory of the queues and Jyoti Das’s father sees only chaos all around. The book ends with hope—“Hope is the beginning.”38 And it is only right that at the end of it, Alu had been successful in getting rid of the book:

I don’t want your book … The Life of Pasteur …
…I don’t want it either…
May be we could give it a funeral, too? she said.
She left him staring at it in silence. After a long while he raised it high on both his hands and placed it reverently on the pyre.39

Alu and the others are thus again trying to leave their past behind and go on with their life. Alu, Zindi and Baby Boss try to find their way back to al-Ghazira and Jyoti Das heads for greener pastures in Europe.

Alu is thus characterised in terms of the metaphors of silence. Alu is not eloquent in terms of words. It is weaving that gives Alu his language and renders a meaning to his silences. It is in terms of the metaphors of weaving that he tries to perceive the world. Although Alu seems to fail in his attempts to reform society, but nonetheless they are significant attempts in trying to improve the world. Weaving thus embodies for him an entire metaphysics and adds meaning to his silences.

**Dinu: Visual Silence and the Language of Resistance**

*The Glass Palace* experiments with several types of language schemes without deviating much from the use of English grapholect to incorporate a truly multi-cultural and cosmopolitan language. We become aware that people originating from different places,

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38 Ibid. 423.
39 Ibid. 415.
like Dhaka, Burma, Malaya, Malaysia and England, speaking different dialects and expressions, do not find it difficult to communicate and carry on with their business. This richness of language acquires the universality of communication, which is so much a characteristic of visual arts. Non-verbal communication thus becomes an important aspect of communiqué in *The Glass Palace*, as the novel involves a plethora of characters across cultures and countries. Photography as an art form is the perfect metaphor for the possibility of such varied communications. Dinu’s world-view also gets expressed in terms of the metaphors of photography.

Rajkumar’s marriage to Dolly was almost a dream come true and is conceived by the narrator in terms of a fairy-tale affair. Dinu, that is, Tun Pe or Dinanath, was the second child of Rajkumar and Dolly. Dinu, unlike Neel, was more like her mother—he had his mother’s delicate features, an ivory complexion and slimness. Dinu was from his childhood extremely prone to sickness; however, he was also gifted with an innate resilience which helped him to combat these diseases. In Huay Zedi, Dinu had become sick and Dolly decided to sleep with Dinu when she had a vision of King Thebaw. She could not understand the meaning of the dream, but she knew it was of some urgency. They rushed Dinu to a hospital in Rangoon. The doctors told them that the boy had polio, and because he was rushed to the hospital in time, his life was saved. The death of King Thebaw actually coincided with the day on which Dolly had this vision that ultimately saved her child. Resilience, stoicism, the strength of will and self-possession have become a part of Dinu’s character from his very childhood. The doctors in the hospital appreciated Dinu’s “exemplary stoicism”\(^{40}\). Dolly was, however, so absorbed with Dinu during his convalescence that everything else was ignored—even Rajkumar, Neel and

\(^{40}\) Ghosh, *Glass Palace*, 206.
her friends. In the silences of the nights, lying beside Dinu in the hospital, she would listen to voices—distance murmurs, screams of pain etc. and she found it difficult to sleep, as she felt a sense of compassion—something, she remembered, the late King telling the girls. Ghosh invokes the Pali word for compassion, *karuna*, to suggest that an easy translation of the word would reduce the richness and multiplicity that the word *karuna* carries. Through the characterisation of Dolly and Dinu silence becomes associated with inner strength, resilience and compassion.

Dinu had struck a bargain with Dolly that he will go to Morningside with them to meet Uma and the Matthews, if she would buy him a Brownie camera from Rowe and Co. Dinu’s interest in photography represents in a way the conflict between the aesthetics of photography and its ability to inscribe family memories into a sort of historical archive. Before 1888, when Eastman invented roll film and marketed it, photography was not available to the common man. The pursuit of photography became the prerogative of amateur specialists. After the invention of Brownie, the camera became available to middle-class people. The reproducibility of photographs enabled it to record and archive memory. The history of photography had, unlike any other art form, functioned as the archive as well as the language for family and kinship. It becomes also the record of the emotive expressions of the body, which is often not expressed or cannot be expressed in terms of the verbal language. This aspect of photography, as something that assists silent communication across time, prompted Dolly to encourage Dinu in pursuing photography, because she felt that his interest in photography has its origin in his childhood habit of looking over the shoulder and that photography can also help him to draw himself out from his introverted nature. Photography becomes such an over-riding passion for Dinu
that he views and expresses and understands the whole world through photography. It is what gives his silences expression and language. Initially Uma found it difficult to communicate with Dinu:

Every time she tried to talk to him he seemed sullen, dour, and such observations as he occasionally had to offer were usually tart to the point of sourness. When he spoke, it was in odd staccato bursts, swallowing half his words and shooting out the rest: a manner of speech that made her afraid of saying anything for fear that she might appear to be interrupting him. It was only when Dinu had a camera in his hands that he seemed to relax a little; but of course it was impossible to talk to someone who had no mind for anything but his viewfinder.41

Dinu was only confident when he was behind the viewfinder: it was photography that provided him with clarity of thought and vision. Uma realises how incompatible Dinu and Alison are, although Dinu is infatuated with Alison. Dinu is so withdrawn and silent that when the words come out from him, it is in “odd staccato bursts” as if each shooting out from the rest:

Nothing would come of it, she could tell: they were as different as could be, he a creature of the shadows, she an animal that craved the spotlight.42

Alison takes Uma and Dinu to visit the shrines at a place where their estate ends and the jungle of Gunung Jerai begins. Dinu is preoccupied in photographing the ruins. The gaze of his camera defies any limitation and bias that may arise out of racial and religious differences. His camera not only pictures the ruins, but is also focussed on the intimacy of love with Alison rather than inscribing the differences and foreignness of Alison’s body. Again Uma becomes aware of the incompatibility of Dinu and Alison, as she takes a picture of them together. Neel and Dinu’s growing up also reflects the

41 Ibid. 226.
42 Ibid. 227.
changes in Burma, as the Indians face hostility from the Burmese. When the riots in Burma start, Dinu is taken home from school by his friend Maung Thiha Shaw.

Dinu’s attitude towards the army has either been outright hostile or of sheer indifference, but when he meets Arjun, he becomes interested in the communal nature of their lives. Dinu has always valued the importance of observation, which is so integral to photography, but never knew that “its value might be weighed in lives”. His life was totally different from the lives of the army men:

This is one of the reasons why he derived so much pleasure from photography. There was no place more solitary than a dark room, with its murky light and fetid closeness.

It is this solitariness that marks Dinu’s maturity and self-possession as well as his difference from the other characters in the novel. Influenced by Alfred Stieglitz’s “Railyard Shots”, Dinu has set up his camera and tripod to take pictures of the Howrah Station. It was Stieglitz who was greatly responsible for establishing photography as an art form. Stieglitz’s photographic philosophy was that the camera vision necessarily influences retinal vision and, therefore, also alters our perception of the world. Photography influences the way one looks at things: it highlights the moment and records the immediacy of the world-lived-in. Stieglitz also believed that all true art is socially constructive. Dinu looks at the world and also perceives the moment through the viewfinder. Photography thus is not merely a record of memory; rather it becomes a philosophy. The narrator also refers, for example, to Atget (Jean-Eugène-August Atget),

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43 Ibid. 277.
44 Ibid. 277.
45 Ibid. 274.
47 Ibid. 13.
a famous photographer who spent his lifetime ‘photographing the face of Paris’\textsuperscript{48}. Each and every Atget picture is remarkable for its clarity of detail. Throughout the novel there are references to famous photographs and photographers and, in fact, photography forms a binding metaphor both for memory and story-telling.

In spite of his withdrawn and silent nature, Dinu is also involved in his own way with the society at large. Dinu’s camera is characterised by a multi-cultural gaze and this is what turns Dinu into a good teacher who is able to register his protest through and within his artistic domain. He possesses definite views on fascism and the empire, but is not closed to arguments and tries, as his discussions with Arjun and Uma reveal, to listen and judge each argument by its own merit. Dinu and his friend, Thiha Saw, participate whole-heartedly in the Air Raid precaution scheme and also involve themselves in the publication of an anti-fascist magazine.

Dinu was sent to Alison’s place, Morningside, after her parents died in a car accident. Dinu becomes preoccupied with photographing the “chandis”\textsuperscript{49} in Gunung Jerai, as he finds it difficult to fit himself in the role of sharing Alison’s grief. Even while making love, Dinu is preoccupied with his camera, as if his camera encompasses a whole way of life for him. Alison complains:

“Dinu,” she cried one day in exasperation, “I feel I have more of your attention when you’re looking into your camera than when you’re lying here with me.”
“I see more of you in this way than I would in any other,” he said. “If I were to talk to you for hours, I wouldn’t know you better. I don’t say this is better than talking ... it’s just my way— my way of understanding...\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{49} Ghosh, Glass Palace, 229.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. 357.
His camera encompasses his world and gives meaning and language to his silences. It is only through the camera that Dinu feels certain about himself. It is to him a way of coming out of oneself as well as coming to terms with the external world:

“I don’t know ... but I feel my pictures have helped me know you ... I think I know you better than I’ve ever known anyone.”
She laughed. “Just because you’ve taken some pictures?”
“Not just that.”
“Then?”
“Because this is the most intimate way that I can know anyone ... or anything.”
“Are you saying you wouldn’t have known me if it weren’t for your camera?”
He looked down at his hands, frowning. “I can tell you this: if I hadn’t spent this time with you, here, taking pictures ... I wouldn’t be able to say with such certainty ...”

Alison finds it difficult to understand Dinu’s preoccupation with the camera. Dinu actually proposes to Alison and it is the camera that has enabled him to express his love in such certain terms, and it has helped him to understand Alison more intimately. Arjun has a brief affair with Alison in spite of his knowing that Dinu loves Alison. Dinu is again lost in his silences, as he cannot compete with Arjun’s robust presence. The difference in their love-making also suggests how Dinu, like his photography and unlike Arjun, concentrates on the moment, as if time has ceased to exist:

She thought of what it was like with Dinu: the intensity of his focus on the moment; the sense of time holding still. It was only against the contrast of this cohabiting of absences that she could apprehend the meaning of what it meant to be fully present—eye, mind and touch united in absolute oneness, each beheld by the other, each beholding.

The narrative here seems to assert Stieglitz’s philosophy of the moment:

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51 Ibid. 358.
52 Ibid. 374.
'I am merely the moment with all of me... When I am no longer thinking but merely am, then I may be said to be truly living; to be truly affirming life.'\textsuperscript{53}

She also comes to realise that Dinu is a much more resourceful and stronger character than Arjun is. Alison and Saya John fail to make their escape successfully and both of them die in a confrontation with the Japanese soldiers. Neel also dies as a result of the bombing near the timber yard at Pazundong, when the elephants, getting mad at the sound, trample over him. Then begins the long forgotten march back to India, with Rajkumar, Dolly and the baby ultimately making it to Lankasuka, whereas Manju, unable to bear her trauma, commits suicide on the way. After staying for a few years in Calcutta, Dolly leaves Rajkumar to search for Dinu, for she has a conviction that Dinu is alive.

The trope of photography is what unites the sprawling and epic narrative of \textit{The Glass Palace}. The photographs actually unite the various time frames in the novel. It thus becomes the extension of the individual or family memory, and can stand beside history as a record of events. However, unlike history, it becomes a personal record of events and the emphasis on moment also enables it to capture the emotions of individuals, which history fails to do. Photography as a metaphor thus weaves the sprawling narrative together in \textit{The Glass Palace}. Photography has often been described as a ‘mirror with a memory’, because it gives permanence to that which is fleeting:

\begin{quote}
Had not the mirror image always been a metaphor for illusion, for change? Photography captured what was transient, gave permanence to what was fleeting; photography was the invention of a ‘mirror with a memory’.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} As quoted in Thomas, 12.

A photograph then is, on the one hand, a reminder of the transient nature of human memory, and, on the other hand, it becomes a memory that forgets nothing. It becomes then an extension of the eye which also has the ability to record: it is a moment made eternal. Dinu’s wedding photographs not only imprints his own view of things, but precisely records that moment which becomes memory. In one corner of Lankasuka, stand two framed photographs— one of Manju and Neel on their wedding day, and the other of Arjun and Kishan Singh at the Howrah station. They serve as a shrine to the memories of these persons, as the family garland their pictures and perform a small ceremony. Jaya, Neel’s daughter, is interested in photography and is fascinated by Dinu’s pictures. It is while enquiring about the pictures that she comes to know that she had an uncle. Dinu’s memories are silenced from the family interactions, as nothing is known either about his whereabouts or what has happened to him. It is thought that he is one “among the many millions who vanished into the darkness”.

Jaya can only start her research on the history of photography in India after her son manages to get a scholarship and goes abroad. In 1996, Jaya’s college sent her to attend an Art History Conference at the University of Goa. The plane was overbooked, so she had to take a train to Bombay. There, in one of the air-conditioned art gallery, she discovers a picture of Uma, the Collector, Rajkumar and Dolly taken at the Collector’s Residence in Ratnagiri. Jaya also notices the way in which Uma is wearing her sari; she is probably one of the first Indian women to be wearing the sari in that manner. Photography here is thus found to record a significant change of dress pattern in women. The Photograph becomes a record as well as an archive for a particular event in the past. The use of photograph and photography as a narrative and thematic strategy might well have been due to Ghosh’s training as an

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55 Ghosh, Glass Palace, 486.
anthropologist, because anthropology as a record of behaviour of people has increasingly relied on photography. It became indispensible as a means of visual communication and provided an opportunity for field-workers to record events which their vocabulary was insufficient to represent. In addition, it provided an authenticity to their findings. The publication of *Balinese Character* in 1942 marked a significant change in the use of photography in Anthropology.\(^{56}\) This shift was primarily directed in recording non-verbal behaviour for which no vocabulary existed.\(^{57}\)

The memories brought back by the photograph of Uma and the others also prompt Jaya to stop at Ratnagiri, as her conference is still two days away. She discovers how the little town of Ratnagiri has succeeded in keeping the memories of King Thebaw alive. The photograph and the visit to Ratnagiri make her search Uma’s documents, so that she can write her biography. It also revives her interest in Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi. It is in one of the magazines that she sees the picture of Aung San Suu Kyi framed in such a manner so as to remind her of Dinu. The picture is credited to U Tun Pe, which, she realises with Bela’s help, must be Dinu’s Burmese name. Bela also gives her the next lead by giving her the name of Ilongo Alagappan. She is able to trace Ilongo Alappan from the internet, as it was he who was responsible for transforming Morningside into one of the pioneering enterprises of the co-operative movement. Ilongo immediately responds positively to her request by sending her a plane ticket. Jaya is fascinated to find quite a large number of Dinu’s pictures in Morningside. Ilongo had heard about Dinu five years back from an activist of Indian origin who fled from Burma and came to Malaysia.


\(^{57}\) Ibid. 172.
He knew Dinu well and informs Jaya that he is staying in Yangon. Dinu is married to a well-known Burmese writer, Daw Thin Thin Yae, and is involved in the democracy movement. His wife has died in prison after contracting tuberculosis. Jaya comes to know that Dinu has a small photo studio named “The Glass Palace” in Yangon. The fact that the novel has a similar title as Dinu’s studio suggests the narrative function that photography performs in the novel. Just as the camera often focuses on an individual in the vast background of nature, like the pictures taken by Dinu at the Howrah station as well as near the shrines, similarly family relationships are being framed within the background of vast historical events in *The Glass Palace*. Jaya finds her way out in Yangon to Dinu’s studio, when he is in the midst of his weekly sessions. She sees a motley crowd of people listening to Dinu’s lecture. She recognises several reproductions of well-known photographs, like Weston’s photograph of a sea-shell, Cartier Bresson’s photograph of a veiled woman and Raghubir Singh’s picture of an old house in Calcutta. Edward Weston’s “Nautilius” has shown the world that photographic eye, which looks for beauty in simple shapes, firmly establishes photography as an art form. The continuous references to photographers and their work set up the modernist dualism of photography as an art form and situate photography as a personal archive in Ghosh’s works. The difference, however, dissolves in Dinu’s pictures which exalt photography as an art form, as each of Dinu’s pictures is not only characterised by his own particular style, but, taken together, they also collectively form a record of personal memories. He photographs his family from the periphery. Dinu has taken a picture of Manju on her wedding day at an unguarded moment, when she has been for an instant an unveiled bride. Later most of the people have appreciated the picture. Dinu thus gives more
preference to aesthetics then family propriety, an aspect which also becomes prominent when Dinu photographs Alison nude.

Dinu’s role has been significantly reversed, for throughout the novel Dinu is characterised by silence. Dinu attains his language and confidence only when he is behind the lens. Dinu’s lectures on photography have an altogether different purpose. It is a sort of unique protest against the repressive regime of Myanmar, which seems to suppress every individual, even their own creative endeavours. What makes them come alive is conversation and that is the purpose of Dinu’s weakly sessions. He just begins the discussion and then the others carry on with it. It is because of Dinu’s collection of photographs that people come to his house. He has gathered many of his materials related to photography from rag-pickers. Dinu is not directly involved in the democratic movement and what protects him from the junta is that he does not discuss any organisational matters in his lectures; rather they discuss ideas:

You have to understand that their brutality is of a strangely medieval ilk ... they are not so advanced as to be able to perceive a threat in what we do in this room. They would never be able to understand the attraction that brings people here, even though some of them are their own children ... nothing that interests them is here— no booze, no drugs, no conspiracy ... that is what protects us. And when we talk of politics it is in such ways that they cannot follow ... we don’t say things they can pin down.58

In Myanmar, there are always government spies, so even the language of protest has to evolve in different forms. To Dinu, photography has evolved as a secret language of protest:

“... If you know the truth of what you see, the rest is mere execution. Nothing can come between you and your imagined desire ... No camera, no lens ...” He shrugged,

58 Ghosh, Glass Palace, 509.
smiling. “To that list I could have added: No band of criminals like this regime ... But I did not have to tell them that in so many words ... They understood what I was saying ... they knew ... you saw how they laughed and clapped ... Here in the Glass Palace photography too is a secret language.\footnote{Ibid. 509-510.}

It is Dinu who with his silent nature has evolved a silent language of protest, a language so radical in nature that it is beyond the comprehension of the military regime. It is how art makes its protest and creates an impact in its own way.

From whatever she comes to know from Dinu, Jaya connects the missing links of the past— what happened to Arjun and Kishan Singh, about Dolly and about Dinu’s wife and about their struggle against the regime. Jaya also has the opportunity to attend a meeting at Aung San Suu Kyi’s place. It is amazing how, in spite of all the troubles, Suu Kyi manages to laugh and how this symbolic defiance of hers has robbed the tyrants of their words and of discourse.

At the end of the novel, two narrative techniques inter-mingle with each other. Jaya tells Dinu, “[W]hat I told is quite different from what I remember”.\footnote{Ibid. 544.} The telling of the story is differentiated from the act of remembering. There is a theme of compassion that runs throughout the story. It is this compassion that makes the telling different from the remembering. Dolly has learnt of this compassion from King Thebaw, who has told the girls in the later years that this act of compassion can change one’s life:

In his later years the King had seemed more and more to dwell on the precepts he had learnt as a novice, in the palace monastery. She remembered a word he’d often used, \textit{karuna}— one of the Buddha’s words, Pali for compassion, for the immanence of all living things in each other, for the attraction of life for its likeness. A time will come, he had said to the girls, when you too will discover what this word
karuna means, and from that moment on, your lives will never again be the same.\textsuperscript{61}

Dolly is able to show compassion to Rajkumar and thus pardons him for his violation in having a liaison with another woman. Dinu has been able to show compassion to Arjun and thus has not been judgmental about him. Uma has also been able to pardon Rajkumar in her act of compassion. It is this compassion that differentiates our remembering and narrating. The narrator, who is Jaya’s son, remembers the last days of Rajkumar and Uma, and their act of love-making, and thus also values this compassion. He, in this way, does justice to the telling of the story. Photography becomes an important metaphor in \textit{The Glass Palace} and helps in connecting the different strands of the narrative. Shameem Black, in his interesting thesis, tries to link Ghosh’s cosmopoetics and the use of language with the use of photography in this novel. Photography, according to him, thus takes on an important narrative as well as a linguistic function. He suggests:

\begin{quote}
...Ghosh offers us a cosmopoetics that illuminates the historical and political power of multiple languages while at the same time mimicking the translingual clarity of the visual arts. Ghosh’s prose style often approaches the visual quality of photography, attempting to reinvent the world of polylingual families in diaspora without idealizing or demonizing the differences among them.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

Photography thus becomes a sort of language that perfectly represents a multi-lingual world which can be understood across cultures. Photography in this novel develops into a tool for communication across time, where memory of individuals gets connected with the greater events of history. It also turns out to be a mode of communication for Dinu

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. 211.
and it is through photography that Dinu can register his protest against the suppressive regime.

**Fokir: Silence and Communication**

It was in the train that Piya first meets Kanai on her way to the Sundarbans. One of the first questions that Kanai asks Piya is whether she knows Hindi or Bengali, and if she does not, then how will she find her way around. Piya replies that language will not be much of a barrier: “Anyway, in my line of work there’s not much talk needed.” Kanai is a professional translator and an interpreter who knows six languages not including the dialects. He is easily able to find out from Piya’s accent that she is an American. Piya is an American cetologist of Indian origin, who has come to the Sundarbans to research on the marine mammals, and is equipped with only one language, which is English. Kanai has been asked to come to the Sundarbans by his aunt Nilima, because Nirmal, his uncle, has left him a diary after his death. The major characters of the novel are all cosmopolitans trying to understand and cope up with the rather different subaltern space in the Sundarbans. So, from the very first chapter, we gather an idea that issues of language and communication would be one of the most important ones in this novel.

Piya has a tough time getting her permissions from the Forest Office. She is almost forced to hire Mej Da’s launch and is also quite amused at Mej Da’s reaction on seeing her display cards of the dolphins. He thinks it is some kind of a bird. Mej Da, who is supposed to be the repository of local knowledge, has thus already created a dismal impression on Piya. Piya first spots Fokir through her rangefinder. As the launch turns towards Fokir on Piya’s insistence, he and his boy are frightened. Mej Da and the forest

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guard charged Fokir of being a poacher with the intention of getting a fine or a bribe from him. As Fokir becomes aware of the presence of a woman in the launch, he adjusts his dress, which is the first hint of human recognition that Piya comes across. She shows him two display cards and Fokir immediately points towards the Irrawady Dolphins and shows six fingers, which gets Piya excited. In order to compensate for Fokir’s loss of money, she wants to draw his attention and while doing so, she falls in the muddy water. It is the names of Lusibari and Mashima that help her to convey to Fokir that she wants to go there and get rid of Mej Da’s boat. The opening incident thus reveals the bureaucratic set up and the corruption of the Forest Guards, who hardly have any knowledge of the forest and only harbour the intention of exploiting innocent and illiterate people. It is also a pointer that one can communicate, if one wishes to, without the use of language. Fokir and Piya do not find it difficult to communicate with each other, because it is the human touch that can redeem any language barrier:

> It was as if he had chosen to include her in some simple, practiced family ritual, found a way to let her know that despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she was a person to him and not, as it were, a representative of a species, a faceless, tongueless foreigner.\(^64\)

The relationship between Piya and Fokir and that between the two of them and the sea are often described in terms of the metaphors of silence. When Fokir’s boat reaches close to a hamlet, Piya fears the queries, the introductions that may break her silence; but without even a word, as if Fokir knew her mind, Fokir steers the boat away:

> …all she wanted was to be in this boat, in this small island of silence, afloat on the muteness of the river.\(^65\)

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\(^64\) Ibid. 71.
\(^65\) Ibid. 84.
At night Fokir seems to be chanting a song and, although Piya does not understand the language in which the song is being sung, she realises that she has heard nothing like it before, for it has a sort of grief that is unsettling. The incomprehension of the meaning of the song on her part does not stop Piya from understanding its relevance. She would have liked to know what he is singing about and what the lyrics mean; but she knows too that even a river of words will not be able to tell her exactly what makes the song sound as it does right at that moment, in that place.\textsuperscript{66}

It is Fokir who rows Piya towards the Dolphins. She is amazed that Fokir shall have known the route of movements of the Irrawaddy Dolphins (\textit{Orcaella brevirostris}). It seems to her that this encounter is nothing new to Fokir. A host of queries flood her mind. It is unusual to find coastal \textit{Orcaella} congregating in a pool and she wonders whether the dolphins have adapted themselves to the tidal ecology of the Sundarbans. She knows that her research can lead to profound implications regarding the conservation of this endangered species. She immediately realises that she will have to carry on her research here for a very long period of time, and that a week or two will not be enough: “…it was the work of a lifetime.”\textsuperscript{67}

Moyna, Fokir’s wife, is a person who knows how to struggle her way up. In spite of all the odds, she has managed to give herself a school education. She is not able to pursue her college ambitions, as her family marries her off to illiterate Fokir, who makes his living by catching crabs. She is now determined to qualify as a nurse and wants to give Tutul, their son, a proper school education. The theme of ecology and conservation is also brought to the fore in different parts of the novel. It is not the local illiterate poor

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid. 99.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. 126.
villagers who harm the environment, for it is with the help of nature that they manage to live in such a hostile place, where the water can submerge the islands within the short span of a single day. Early in the novel, Piya comes to a confrontation with the Forest Guards who are hardly aware of the ecology of the place, but is more interested in exploiting the poor villagers. Again, Moyna is aware that Fokir may not make a living by catching crabs in the future, as Mashima has told her that traders and politicians are bent on using big nets to catch the spawns of tiger prawns to make huge profits. Their nets are so fine that they can catch the eggs of all other fish as well. Mashima wants to get the nets banned, but to no avail. The narrator builds up on all these incidents in order to suggest how the elements of the state machinery as well as the businessmen with their profiteering motif can do more harm to the natural environment than ordinary villagers can. Self-styled researchers, with their generalised theories and concerns, can also do much harm to the place, because their research is removed from the dynamics of the place and the man-nature relationship and also because their research findings are often taken advantage of for political and business gains.

Piya is also able to make Fokir understand the route she wants to follow by making two-dimensional diagrams. Fokir likes to follow the same route, as he jumps at the prospect of catching a few crabs:

…it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously—people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another’s heads—was far more than surprising: it seemed almost miraculous.  

Throughout the novel there is the acknowledgement of the way in which a trained cetologist like Piya is able to communicate with an illiterate villager like Fokir without

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68 Ibid. 141.
the necessity of words. It is emphasised that knowledge is not restricted to only those who possess words and language, but it spreads well beyond the elite or literate class of people: even an ordinary illiterate person like Fokir has power over a wealth of knowledge about his own natural surroundings through his experience and perception. There is also an underlying current throughout this novel of an intuitive understanding between two persons— an understanding that has the redemptive capacity of an ennobling communication without any language.

Piya has trusted Fokir and so, she has no hesitation in following him to Garjontola pool. Fokir enacts a pantomime to teach Piya how to walk in the mud. Fokir and Tutul perform a little ceremony in front of the Bon Bibi shrine. Piya is amazed to notice that they are praying in the name of Allah and yet the way they are offering their puja seems to be like performing a Hindu ritual. It is in this life lived in the periphery of life and death that religious conflicts no longer seem important. The story of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli is a living example of how the people in the Sundarbans have always lived in unity. The Bon Bibi story is also a pointer to how these local myths and superstitions actually go on to protect the natural ecology.

The issue of language also forms an important basis for Kanai’s interaction. Kanai, being a translator and interpreter, is full of words. He, however, fails to understand how an educated girl like Moyna marries an illiterate man like Fokir:

‘I wouldn’t understand?’ he said sharply. ‘I know five languages; I’ve travelled all over the world. Why wouldn’t I understand?’

She let her âchol drop from her head and gave him a sweet smile. ‘It doesn’t matter how many languages you know,’ she said. ‘You’re not a woman and you don’t know him. You won’t understand.’

69 Ibid. 156.
Moyna also on her part fails to understand how Fokir can in anyway be useful to Piya, a trained cetologist. Piya and Fokir experience their surroundings in similar ways, so that seeing becomes a way of speaking:

The thought of experiencing your surroundings in that way never failed to fascinate her: the idea that to ‘see’ was also to ‘speak’ to others of your kind, where simply to exist was to communicate.\(^{70}\)

It is the bonding between two individuals that can create a language. This language is not necessarily vocal; mere gestures or silence can be informed with language. It is this bonding that Piya’s father and mother lacked, so that Bengali to her became a language of quarrel and conflict. Human language although originally intended to built bridges and communicate, was also often used as a means “of shutting each other out.”\(^{71}\) Language and speech also creates a sense of complacency and a mirror to translate the world:

… speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being.\(^{72}\)

The first part of the novel ends with Piya and Fokir reaching Lusibari. The narrative of Nirmal’s journal entries almost run parallel to the story of Piya and Fokir, although they are located in completely different time frames. Nirmal’s diary recalls the injustice done to the refugees of Morichjhāpi by the Government. Piya’s research on the dolphins and his relationship with Fokir develops in the other narrative.

It is the instincts that Fokir relies on. Nirmal had once asked Fokir, when he was a child, to listen to the sound that comes out from the clay. Fokir was able to figure out that that sound was made by the crabs burrowing into the bādh. Nirmal had told him that

\(^{70}\) Ibid. 159.  
\(^{71}\) Ibid. 159.  
\(^{72}\) Ibid. 159.
neither man nor angels would help them. The animals will also carry on with the destruction, as even they are aware that human beings are not comfortable in their translated world:

‘... Because the animals

“already know by instinct
we’re not comfortably at home
In our translated world”’.  

Nirmal is trying to emphasise how nature must prevail in such places as the Sundarbans and how life is lived there in the continuous fear of death. A small storm can submerge an entire island within a matter of a couple of hours. How prophetic and ironic it seems that Fokir should also die in one such storm! In *The Hungry Tide*, there is an inter-textuality continuously running through Nirmal’s narrative. Nirmal is often quoting from Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. It is through Rilke’s poems that he is trying to make sense of the world around him. Rilke’s text provides an ethical and metaphysical voicing of Nirmal’s concerns. It is the poet’s words that fill in the gap of our understanding and help us to come to terms with the world.

Piya is rather dismayed to find Fokir a completely different person in his house. Fokir clearly looks beaten down and afraid of anything and everything around him; he seems to be one who does not want to take part in any conversation. Fokir is a completely different character when he is at sea: it is the natural environment which he is adept to and which gives him confidence and certainty; without the boat he seems lost to the world. The silence of Fokir is also a response to and a defence against the assault of those who are supposed to be superior to him in terms of his society. Kanai speaks to Fokir in a very condescending way:

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73 Ibid. 206.
...it was the kind of tone in which someone might address a dimwitted waiter, at once jocular and hectoring. It didn’t surprise her that Fokir had responded with what was clearly his instinctive mode of defence: silence.74

Piya again wants Fokir to accompany her to the expedition of tracing the map and route of the dolphins in the Garjontola pool. Moyna is quite intrigued at this and wants to know how an illiterate person like Fokir can be of any help to Piya; to this, she replies that Fokir knows the river well. Kusum has once taken pride in this fact, when Fokir was merely a child:

‘See, Saar: the river is in his veins.’75

In all of Ghosh’s works, there is always a sense of syncretism running through the narrative— a type of position where one does not get bogged down by binary division; rather in his world of fiction (as well as that of non-fiction) nothing is exclusive, as the narrator tries to unite different forms of knowledge into one organic whole. Fokir’s knowledge will be useful to Piya and cetological research. The problem with educated persons is that they always try to judge others in terms of their approach to life— their “egalitarian, liberal, meritocratic”76 values. The narrator again uses the image of the looking-glass to explain how we judge other people with our standards, so that anything different is relegated to the other:

Piya understood too that this was a looking-glass in which a man like Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was Lusibari.77

75 Ibid. 245.
76 Ibid. 218.
77 Ibid. 220.
These islands and its people cannot be judged with middle-class values of a secured world, for here “transformation is the rule of life.”

Man has always lived in his natural environment. The Morichjhâpi incident and other such endeavours to uproot indigenous people in the name of ecological conservation have always been over-wrought with political and business motifs on the part of the Government. Ecological groups should also be aware of two things: first and foremost, they should realise that one set of ecological theories cannot be applicable everywhere in the world. For the success of conservation policies one must also take into account local religion, myths and culture, i.e., to mean local cultural knowledge. Secondly, they should also understand that indigenous people have done more to save their environment than what they do to destroy it. It is rather the mechanical man, with mechanical modes of production, who has brought down more destruction to the world. The relationship of Fokir and Piya is an example of how one should go about understanding nature by using Western science and traditional ecological knowledge at tandem in order to protect the natural environment. Nature, to people like Fokir, acquires the symbolic dimension of the Almighty, so that the Dolphins become Bon Bibi’s messengers. Fokir’s fishing for some crabs to survive does not do any harm to the natural environment; rather it is those sophisticated nets that the businessmen use to catch tiger spawns which harm the natural ecology of the tide country more than anything else. Those nets are so fine that they trap the eggs of other fishes besides tiger spawns. It is the Forest Guards who do more harm to the environment than the ordinary villagers. Again, it is those boats of the Forest Department that harm the dolphins. Thus, through the relationship between Piya and Fokir, Ghosh is advocating an ecological policy which can

78 Ibid. 224.
take into consideration local knowledge and local people. It is through the local myths that we find the tigers are protected in their natural habitat. The common villagers do not even utter the name of the tiger, because they feel that merely by uttering its name, they will bring death to themselves. The Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Ray story is the perfect example of how local myths can protect the environment. Nirmal’s narrative is a pointer to how cruel the government can be in displacing and evicting poor villagers in the name of conserving the environment.

Words are always framed by a sea of silence. Moyna, Fokir’s wife, places the significance of words in the right perspective. The chapter is also significantly titled “Words”. It focuses on what an interpreter and a translator can do with words. In fact, this can be a metaphorical extension of what an artist can do with words. Moyna is feeling a little insecure about the relationship that is developing between Fokir and Piya. As an interpreter, Kanai would know what is going on in the minds of both the persons, without either of them knowing what his stand is. She urges Kanai to mediate between them, to make Fokir understand his standing in society:

‘Their words will be in your hands and you can make them mean what you will.’

She also emphasises how difficult it is to put a particular thing in perspective from within a relationship, whereas it might be relatively easy for an outsider to do so:

‘Because words are just air, Kanai-babu,’ Moyna said. ‘When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard. You can’t blow on the water’s surface from below, Kanai-babu. Only someone who’s outside can do that, someone like you.’

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79 Ibid. 257.
80 Ibid. 258.
Within the intimacy of a relationship, there is always the parameter of what can be said and what cannot be said. The real river that Moyna talks about which lies beneath, unseen and unheard, is the silence that frames the words, is the meanings that is created within the intimacy of the relationships. Words in a context acquire meaning in the type of silence that frames it, and these silences are created differently in every relationship: they give the words their own unique flavour. These parameters are, however, relaxed for the one who is outside the relationship, for words would then be conveyed at the intended surface level. The metaphor of the river is the seamlessness of meanings that language can carry. There is always the feeling that Piya and Fokir understand each other and anticipate each other without even a word being said between the two. Piya is aware of Fokir’s abilities: the natural instinct that Fokir possesses is something extremely rare. Very few persons are able to adapt themselves to the natural environment like Fokir does:

‘But that’s how it is in nature you know: for a long time nothing happens, and then there’s a burst of explosive activity and it’s over in seconds. Very few people can adapt themselves to that kind of rhythm— one in a million, I’d say. That’s why it was so amazing to come across someone like Fokir. … It’s like he’s always watching the water—even without being aware of it. I’ve worked with many experienced fishermen before but I’ve never met anyone with such an incredible instinct: it is as if he can see right into the river’s heart.’

Piya also praises Fokir’s abilities as an observer. Kanai has even felt a little sense of envy for Fokir and quips on the fact that all her liking and praise for Fokir’s ability are based on an utter lack of communication. It is this condescending attitude of people like Kanai which actually become impediments to true knowledge; it is this attitude that hinders the possibility of proper communication. People like Kanai believe in the existing social

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81 Ibid. 267.
system and its advocacy of a particular type of epistemology and meritocracy, which ultimately leads to certain assumptions that cannot tolerate any alterity.

The episode of killing the tiger, however, is a setback for Piya. Her reaction anticipates an outsider’s perspective of the ecology of the Sundarbans and actually simplifies the man-nature relationship. Her estimation of Fokir undergoes certain changes, as she cannot accept that Fokir too will participate in the killing of the tiger. The narrator though does not throw his weight on any side; and this is an aspect which is prevalent everywhere in Ghosh’s fictional world. Everybody is given the opportunity to tell his side of the story. In the Sundarbans, almost every day we hear of tigers killing human beings; so, for persons like Fokir, a tiger that trespasses human habitation is meant to be punished. The complexities of ecological conservation policies are brought to light by Kanai: how the elite, and other people like them, are actually complicit in the human cost that is often ignored in such conservation policies:

It happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it.82

The poor and the indigenous people often have to bear the brunt of the conservation policies. Even scientists like Piya become mere tools of the government agency, as their research are often utilised by businessmen and politicians to further their own interests. Fokir’s world is the world of stories— the stories that his mother had told him. He knows Garjontola from his mother’s stories much before he first goes there. It is a place where,

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82 Ibid. 300.
she told him, “no one who was good at heart would ever have cause for fear.”\textsuperscript{83} Life is lived through stories and instinctive understanding of the world, and this is something that is addressed in most of Ghosh’s novels. In his mother’s stories, these Dolphins which live here are Bon Bibi’s messengers. It was Fokir’s grandfather who had told her mother that if one could follow the trail of the Dolphins, he would always be able to find fish.

Kanai finds that the best way to draw Fokir into conversation is when he is at sea: it creates “a small opening in the barrier of Fokir’s silence”.\textsuperscript{84} Ghosh uses the potter metaphor to describe Kishan Singh in \textit{The Glass Palace} and here, in \textit{The Hungry Tide}, he uses the same metaphor to describe Fokir:

She craved it in the same way that a potter’s hands might crave the resistance of unshaped clay.\textsuperscript{85}

People like Fokir are not pre-fixed by a given system or an education, so they do not necessarily follow the beaten track of life. Their charm lies in their defiance of the existing norms and conventions of society. Kanai realises why a girl like Moyna is so deeply tied to him. There is an intimacy and a sense of attachment that can only be associated with people like Fokir. When Kanai asks him about his mother, his reply is simple, yet deeply touching:

‘Where do you see her face?’
He smiled and began to point in every direction, to the ends of the compass as well as to his head and feet: ‘Here, here, here, here. Everywhere.’\textsuperscript{86}

In the Chapter titled ‘Signs’, a chapter which almost has metaphysical implications in it, Fokir takes Kanai to Garjontola to be judged. He has seen from the boat the pugmarks of

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid. 307.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. 319.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. 319.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid. 319.
the tiger, which suggested to him that the great beast is probably watching them. Fokir has goose-bumps in fear of what he has seen. Fokir’s mother had told him that this is a place where the good at heart has nothing to fear. Even fear is something that needs to be learnt; Kanai, who is not that aware of the sundarban environment, is not able to feel that fear—the fear arising out of the tiger lurking around. This is an instinct which is lost to a city-dweller like Kanai, as he is not able gauge the natural environment the way Fokir does. The contest is stark and bare and is relegated to the primeval instincts of man. In such a contest, one’s education, one’s social standing—nothing matters; all that is of consequence in such a situation is one’s basic instinct and whether one is good at heart. Kanai thinks that Fokir is being childish to draw him to such a contest; but, to Fokir, it is the essence of his existence: to be judged by the very nature that sustains an individual:

Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged.  

The tiger, to the people of the Sundarbans, is something more than an animal. In the manner in which a tiger kills a human being, with one swipe of its forepaw, there is a quality of mercy, as the suddenness and the shock resulting from its swiftness and its roar makes it almost a painless death. Reduced to his bare essentials, Kanai can no longer remain calm, as his external veneer fails and the violence that has so far lain hidden within him, congregates in an angry outburst of expletives. However, when he becomes aware of the primeval nature of his fear, he is stripped off his language and is reduced to silence. His language fails, and yet he must know this fear through language:

He could not recall the word, not even the euphemisms Fokir had used: it was as if his mind, in its panic had emptied itself of language. The sounds and signs that had served, in combination, as the sluices between his mind and

87 Ibid. 327.
his senses, had collapsed: his mind was swamped by a flood of pure sensation. The words he had been searching for, the euphemisms that were the source of his panic, had been replaced by the thing itself, except that without words it could not be apprehended or understood, it was an artefact of pure intuition, so real that the thing itself could not have dreamed of existing so intensely.88

The fear itself is so terrible that it has formed itself into a delusion. Kanai has to be given a sedative to bring him back to his senses. The confidence that Kanai earlier exhibited is no longer visible after the incident and, therefore, he decides to leave Piya and Fokir alone. Kanai in his letter to Piya has acknowledged that the incident at Garjontola has actually transformed him from an egoistic self-centred man to one who now understands the littleness of himself in relation to the world outside:

‘…at Garjontola I learnt how little I know of myself and of the world.’89

In certain senses, both Kanai and Horen become aware that Fokir and Piya might probably be in love. It also echoes Nirmal’s love for Kusum. Both the relationships are seemingly incompatible, when thought of in terms of the society; but, both have somehow found a place for itself and have created its own trajectory. Metaphorically, it is the love across the seas which remind us again of the Tristan story as in The Shadow Lines90. The parallelism between the two relationships is quite striking. Both Nirmal and Kanai are full of words, while, on the other hand, Fokir and Horen are not able to communicate properly; yet it is their presence which creates all the difference, as Piya chooses Fokir sand Kusum choose Nirmal:

‘I saw that he, like me, could not stop thinking of her: she had entered his blood just as she had mine. At her name he

88 Ibid. 329.
89 Ibid. 353.
would come alive, his step would change, words would come pouring out of him. He was a man of many words, your uncle—and I had very few. I knew he was wooing her with his stories and tales—I had nothing to give her by my presence, but in the end it was me she chose.91

Even their act of love-making is described in terms of the lack of language, the needlessness of language when the two souls unite; they create a language of their own in such a manner that silence becomes an appropriate method of communication. It also becomes one with the language of nature. It is language transformed into flesh:

‘There was nothing to say and nothing to be said; there were no words to chafe upon our senses; just an intermingling like that of fresh water and salt, a rising and falling as of the tides.’92

Piya and Fokir shelter themselves in a branch of a mangrove tree, as the storm is upon them. The ferocity of the storm makes itself felt as if “death ha[s] announced its approach.”93 It is Fokir who protects her from the storm with his body, taking in everything—from the “arrowing”94 rain to the projectiles—that are hurting his back. Fokir dies after he is hit by a big and heavy stump, as he still protects Piya with his body which slowly become lifeless. Even their last communication is without words, as they understand perfectly well what they want to say to each other:

She recalled the promises she had made to him, in the silence of her heart, and how, in those last moments, with the wind and the rain still raging around them … She remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved—and once again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words.95

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92 Ibid. 364.
93 Ibid. 383.
94 Ibid. 384.
95 Ibid. 393.
In their grief, Piya has formed a bonding with Moyna and they spend quite a lot of time together, sitting silently beside each other. It is silence which provides them some form of relief against the incomprehensibility of Fokir’s death. Piya comes back to Lusibari to keep her promise and to do her bit for Moyna and Tutul and, of course, for the Orcaella.

Non-verbal communication in terms of the lack of verbal language is something that is predominant with certain prominent characters in Ghosh’s novels. In this respect, Ghosh has been greatly influenced by the films of Satyajit Ray, as he has himself acknowledged in the interview:

My approach to it has been in terms like, say, in Bengali cinema— the way Satyajit Ray uses non-communication in so many powerful ways. Generally within our culture there is a valuation often on non-verbal communication. So, I think, that has also been a major kind of influence on me. Some of the most poignant moments in Satyajit Ray’s work essentially come from moments of non-communication, for example, in the closing scene of Charulata. To me it has always been very powerful.\(^96\)

The lack of sound and the lack of verbal communication acquire a symbolic dimension in Ray’s films, like Charulata\(^97\), Apu’s Trilogy\(^98\), Kanchenjungha\(^99\), Pikoo’s Day\(^100\) etc. Pikoo, for example, is a six-year-old child registering the little details of family life. The film is set from the perspective of Pikoo. In a household, where all the other family members are adults, Pikoo is the only solitary child. Pikoo’s grandfather is ill and is, therefore, confined to his room. Pikoo’s mother receives a lover, when his father is away
at work. Being confined by silence, Pikoo seeks to engage with silence. One of the games that Pikoo play is to silence the others. He first tries it with the neighbour’s dog by shouting ‘Hush!’, and it works; then his mother and her lover, whom Pikoo calls Hitesh Uncle, are arguing, when he silences them by saying ‘Hush!’: he realises the power that this sound has.\textsuperscript{101} The child registers everything in silence and the film ends in a very poetic manner. Pikoo has resorted to express his world through his drawing of flowers. The film ends with a question addressed to his mother, who is then in the arms of her lover, “Shall I use black crayon to draw a white flower?” A large drop of rain has fallen on his drawing, thus making an ugly smudge. Pikoo goes back to the house to find his grandfather dead. Pikoo’s mother is unable to see the world, as the innocent Pikoo is does so in terms of black and white. Pikoo’s experiments with silence as well his silence in terms of the adult world create a symbolic language of innocence.

In Charulata, Ray’s artistry becomes manifest in a very silent scene where Charu arcs back and forth in a swing with Amal flitting in an out of her view. This framing of the image communicates the anxiety more than any verbal communication could. Seen from her point of view, Amal is truly ushered in and out of her life. The closing scene of Charulata, to which Ghosh himself refers to in the interview, is also steeped in silence. Charu’s artistic capabilities are revealed by her story being published in a literary magazine, something that her husband Bhupati thought she was not capable of. Charu’s fascination for Bhupati’s brother Amal creates in her the anxiety that emanates from a forbidden love. Charu and Bhupati’s marriage is now forever on the rocks. The brilliant last scene is rendered in a series of tableaus and frames. She pleadingly reaches her hand

out to him and he appears to take it, but there is the feeling that their world is no longer the same. The music is almost suspended as the images are frozen in time. There is not much sound in the last scene and not many words are said either; and yet so much had been said. Communication reaches a sublime plane in Ray’s films, as he explores the nuances and subtleties in individual relationships. There is a sort of deep communication between individuals, where silence itself becomes a language. This is what Ghosh seeks to achieve in his characterisation. The difference is that in the films, the visual images and music or lack of it creates the silence, whereas Ghosh has to conjure silence through the only means available to him, this, is, through words.

Non-verbal communication, however, is not lack of communication, as we see that these characters quite easily find other modes of expression. This paradox, in a sense, is echoed in the lines quoted from *Looking for Livingstone*, where she says nothing in nature is silent, even though it is the language of silence. Their language in terms of photography, weaving, fishing etc. provides them the mode of communication from within their epistemologies, so that their speech is not appropriated by the several social markers of everyday speech. Their silences become creative and communicative in that it restores them their own agency and also enables them to register their protest against dominant aesthetics of power, without being automatically implicated within the process.